

1991?

Gulf War

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Victor Gottbaum: What we are seeing in US today is "normal nationalism," common to all countries, under these circumstances. "As in England after Falklands." It is glorying in a "win"--as in Olympics--rather than an expression of "militarism." (But isn't Bush trying to tilt US nationalism/patriotism in the direction of military might, prowess, pride, as distinct from pride in Olympics? And isn't there a strong streak of imperial nationalism in both these countries: compared, say, to Sweden today, or even to Germany and Japan, or Italy? Note that it is hard to say of these last cases that: no good came from a war; no country was changed for the better by war, or by defeat or US occupation; in war there are no victors, no victory, no winners. This is the historical memory upon which Bush draws: and why shouldn't he?)

Gottbaum: It is also normal, not peculiarly American, to be unconcerned over the scale of enemy dead in war. [Note the line between the world's unconcern over Iraqi and Iranian dead during that war, in which Iraq was again the aggressor, and in which the US and others aided both sides, with targetting data and weapons, to kill each other.]

Gottbaum is rather sanguine over the possibility that this precedent will lead to other wars. "Bush doesn't need them. Opportunities for a "good war" don't come very often. Peru and Colombia don't offer the chance of a clear, quick, dramatic, decisive win. The public isn't eager to do this again." [From this point of view, one might hope that this war had "immunized" the Bush Administration against other conflicts it might otherwise have been tempted to enter. However, if Bush is "challenged"...]

VG had already noted Bush as someone who must win, and would use anything, no matter how brutal, to win. In election, prior to Willie Horton, he had predicted this: Bush will be very charming and pleasant, unless the prospect of losing looms... However, he had thought in the Gulf conflict that Bush was mounting "overkill, overwhelming force" in order to make SH back down, rather than to go to war. [In that, I was right.]

Christopher Hitchens, Harper's, January 1991: Why We Are Stuck in the Sand.

Faits malaccomplis:

"We know already, as every historian will [is Hitchens ironic in this paragraph, or not?] that the President, in having the emir come by [Sept. 1990] was not concerned with dispelling any impression that he was the one who had 'lot Kuwait' to Iraq in

early August. The tiny kingdom had never been understood as 'ours' to lose, as far as the American people and their representatives knew. [But that was true of Vietnam, before 1961.] Those few citizens who did not know Kuwait (human-rights monitors, scholars, foreign correspondents) [and oil-men and bankers, like Bush] knew it was held together by a relatively loose yet unmistakably persistent form of feudalism. It could have been "lost" only by its sole owners, the Al-Sabah family, not by the United States or by the "free world." 70

..."It is against this backdrop--one of signals and nods and tilts and intrigues [help for Kurds against Iraq, at Shah's request, dropped when Iran and Iraq agree on border; Iraqgate, dealing with both sides, especially Iran; encouragement to Iraq to attack Iran, failure to warn Iran--or threaten Iraq...]--and not against that of Bush's anger at Iraqi aggression (he is angry, but only because realpolitik has failed him) that one must read the now-famous transcript of the Glaspie-Saddam meeting last July."

Note: "Saddam closes [his opening monolog] by saying he hopes that President Bush will read the transcript himself,..." [Does this mean that Iraq provided the White House with a transcript of this conversation at the time, since Glaspie had brought no note-taker?!]

Glaspie now says that she said the US "had no opinion" on the border disputes "so long as they were settled non-violently." And she says that SH understood that US might use force otherwise: the point of US deployments and exercises. But she also said, after the transcript was released by Iraq [Had it earlier been given in this "edited" form to the US, or do they also have an unabridged version from Iraq sent at the time?] that "we never expected they would take all of Kuwait."

Was US prepared to use force--or even sanctions--if Iraq had taken only the northern strip of Kuwait and the islands? Was SH supposed to infer that the US might use force in this case?

Hitchens: "This [Glaspie comment] will, I hope, remind you that Gary Sick and his Carter-team colleagues did not think Iraq would take all of Iran's Khuzistan region. [In the September 1980 attack on Iran.] And those with a medium-term grasp of history might recall as well how General Alexander Haig was disconcerted by General Ariel Sharon's 1982 dash beyond the agreed-upon southern portion of Lebanon all the way to Beirut. [Recall, too, that the Argentine occupation of the Falklands came as a surprise to the British: whereupon Thatcher reacted in the same way, and with the same ultimate political triumph, that she urged on Bush on August 2. I.e., she was in a position to instruct him not only on geopolitical necessities and responsibilities, but on domestic political incentives.] In the world of realpolitik there is always the risk that those signaled will see nothing but green lights."

This is a crucial analogy to the Suez Crisis, and to Cuba II, where Khrushchev's calculations in putting the missiles into Cuba may have been very similar to Saddam's in taking Kuwait ("They won't be happy--they will be very unhappy, but serve them right, they asked for it--to have me go this far, but they'll accept it: what else can they do?") In both cases, they had gotten green lights for doing something short of what they did: in ways that probably suggested to them American caution and willingness to accomodate. And they were used to ambiguous, tacit signals, as the US was used to using...in the twilight zone where real US aims and relationships are masked from the public and other allies by plausible denial.

A triumph, so far, for realpolitik and its practitioners. "Privately, Washington's realpols gloated: we were the superpower--deutsche marks and yen be damned." 78

"Generally, it must be said that realpolitik has been better at dividing than at ruling. Take it as a whole since Kissinger called on the Shah in 1972 [agreement to aid the Kurds against Iraq, and to sell Iran unlimited amounts of weapons], and see what the harvest has been. The Kurds have been further dispossessed, further reduced in population, and made the targets of chemical experiments. [Recall the fate the the Montagnards; the Cambodians; and the contras.] [Oddly, Hitchens doesn't mention the fate of the Shah!] Perhaps half a million Iraqi and Iranian lives have been expended to no purpose on and around the Fao peninsula. [Iran occupied it in 1986, during Irangate: as SH reminded Glaspie.] The Syrians, aided by an anti-Iraqi subvention from Washington, have now ingested Lebanon. The Israeli millennialists are bent on ingesting the West Bank and Gaza. In every country mentioned, furthermore, the forces of secularism, democracy and reform have been dealt appalling blows. And all of these crimes and blunders will necessitate future wars. That is what US policy has done, or helped to do, to the region. What has the same policy done to Ameerica?" 78

..."The call was to an exercise in peace through strength. But the cause was yet another move in the policy of keeping a region divided and embittered, and therefore accessible to the ranchisers of weaponry and the owners of black gold."

[Issue, which Socialist Action, etc., denies or refuses to address: Is it possible that this situation is still less bad than that the region should be "united and strong" under Saddam Hussein? Or his like? Less bad for Europe, the Third World, as well as US interests?]

"An earlier regional player, Benjamin Disraeli, once sarcastically remarked that you could tell a weak government by its

eagerness to resort to strong measures. The Bush administration uses strong measures to ensure weak government abroad and has enfeebled democratic government at home. The reasoned objection must be that this is a dangerous and dishonorable pursuit [but see question above], in which the wealthy gamblers have become much too accustomed to paying their bad debts with the blood of others."

 --The antiwar movement was confounded, in part, by the fact that the opening of the air war came so quickly after the January 15 deadline (so that demonstrations scheduled after opening of spring term for students came too late) and then by the fact that the ground war was so quickly successful! (ending well before the next round of scheduled demonstrations).

 On question: When did Administration know that they faced an easy war? Joe McGinniss believes: from the start, in August. I doubt this: if so, why waste two and a half months, after late October, doubling the forces, calling up reserves, taking the risks of provoking a public and Congressional debate and elite opposition, even the risk that Saddam would withdraw, the risks of pressures for negotiations? In reality, i.e. with hindsight, it appears that the doubling of forces was not needed: the earlier 280,000 troops would have been more than adequate, given the effects of bombing and sanctions on Iraqi morale and destruction. It must be that the Administration did not fully foresee this, or count on it.

Moreover, there is the question: If there was intelligence information that clearly and unequivocally pointed to an easy win, why didn't Nunn know it, or why wasn't he convinced by it? Or, Jones and Crowe? A possibility is that Nunn (but why his witnesses like Jones and Crowe--though note that Crowe later came aboard, on possibility that airpower would win) was deliberately kept in the dark, to mousetrap him, as a Presidential rival, along with the whole Democratic Party following his lead. But could this reliably be done, if clear evidence existed? Note that he maintained his opposition right up to the vote, in January 12. More likely: the evidence just wasn't that convincing, especially in late November when the hearings were held. The Administration may have become convinced, or at least hopeful, from December on, still more in January, and either withheld these data from Nunn, or not tried hard to dissuade him from his skepticism.

Why was Aspin "right"? Gottbaum: Aspin is a hawk, lightweight and unprincipled; Nunn is a responsible conservative. (Note Nunn's persistence in the principled position: war really is a last resort. Not the position of realpolitikers like Aspin, Bush, Kissinger, Nixon.

If the USG knew from the start that there was little risk of

a long and costly ground war, then: 1) their ability to fool not only the media but such people as Nunn, Jones and Crowe, Brzezinski, Schlesinger (why, except for Nunn?) is really remarkable; and 2) they were not really demonstrating recklessness, in terms of their own values.

My own guess is that they were demonstrating recklessness--in part a response to Bush's own feelings of anger and desperation--at least early in the confrontation, or beyond the decision in later October to double the force.

Gottbaum: SH really is a madman, a megalomaniac; he did not make just make "a little mistake" (as I said, facetiously). The point is, VG implies, that in taking all of Kuwait he really did show a degree of independence that the US could not live with, and should not have been expected (by SH) to live with; he indicated an ambition to control the politics of the oil of the Mideast, not as an agent of the US.

Still, it does not seem "mad" to me for him to hope or even believe that he could get away with a fait accompli, given the huge risks and costs of opposing him by force. And effective sanctions did not seem likely at first; and at worst, he could live with a retreat in face of sanctions, especially with some face-saving concessions by the Arabs and US. Bush's boldness, competence and intransigence were not confidently to be expected (any more than JFK's, in Cuba II: which concealed a greater willingness to compromise than Bush probably had).

--One must be reminded: the principle of absolute non-intervention--which Bush is invoking constantly this month as the rationale for not supporting the Kurds in their struggle for self-determination--is not a principle of American foreign policy. It is the sacred axiom of the smaller states of the UN, who proclaim it as a protection against the US and other permanent members of the Security Council, in particular, against other former colonial powers and against larger neighbors. Among Americans, it is Noam Chomsky who holds it as a virtual absolute, not American Presidents.

From the President who invaded Panama, backed the contras, and still sends money to the Afghan rebels even after the Soviets have left, fueling a continuing civil war, the "principle" he claims to be following is ludicrous.

His alleged fear of "becoming entrapped in another Vietnam" is more plausible; indeed, I emphasized this danger myself in arguing against a military offensive against Iraqi forces. (I thought it likely that US forces would march on Baghdad, following the predictions of the CDI. I wonder what LaRocque is saying now!) But it is far less plausible than it was a few months ago, before the test in battle of US forces against the Iraqis, and the demonstrations of opposition to Saddam Hussein in Iraq. When it comes to getting into Baghdad, and the probable reception US forces would have in the first few months of occupation, I would not any longer be inclined to forecast major US casualties.

Moreover, the prospect of being "mired down" indefinitely within Iraq seems greater with the course Bush has adopted now, under the pressure of the television coverage of Kurdish refugees and the unwillingness of the Turks to provide permanent haven to the Kurds, while Saddam remains in power, than with a move on Baghdad that decisively removes the Hussein regime.

What Bush is revealing unmistakably by his choices over the last few weeks is that he prefers the Baath Party dictatorship to any plausible alternative: just as he did before August 2, just as the US has done for over a quarter of a century.

He prefers rule by a small subset of a minority of (secular) Sunni Muslims to rule, or an increased role, by the Shiite majority, and he prefers it to self-determination or autonomy for the Kurds. He prefers dictatorship to democracy in Iraq, which would move in the alternative directions even if it did not lead to the partitioning of Iraq.

A major reason for this is that it is strongly preferred by the neighboring Sunni dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and Turkey,

which are very "friendly" to the US and which feel threatened by any regional example of democracy, self-determination, and specifically by autonomy for Kurds (Turkey) or Shiites (the Saudis).

According to Newsweek, April 22, 1991, p. 27, "Bush's Rude Surprise": "George Bush thought he had it all figured out. Embittered Iraqi soldiers would march on Baghdad to settle scores with a regime that had sent them to their doom in Kuwait. Iraq's ethnic minorities would revolt. In the inner sanctum, Baath Party hacks and Army generals would turn on Saddam and drive him from power. Indeed, the United States intentionally refrained from destroying the entire Iraqi Army in Operation Desert Storm so enough soldiers would be left to topple the dictator and hold the country together. Under new and stable leadership, the theory went, Iraq would not disintegrate into another Lebanon."

"Hold the country together" against what forces? This says virtually directly that the US meant to leave enough forces under central Baath control to put down rebellions by the Kurds and Shiites, the very rebellions that Bush had explicitly called forth. As in the 1970's, as revealed by the Pike Commission, it was against the wishes of the US for the rebellion it was encouraging (and then supplying) to succeed. The function of the Kurds was to fight and die and fail, while "pressing" Saddam Hussein.

A CIA memo of 1974 revealed in the Pike Report (US News and World Report, April 15, 1991, p. 32) stated: "We would think that [Iran] would not look with favor on the establishment of a formalized autonomous [Kurdish] government...[Iraq] is intrinsically weakened by [the Kurdish] refusal to relinquish its semiautonomy. Neither [Iran] nor ourselves wish to see the matter resolved one way or the other."

A perfect example of a "stalemate machine." (Might the SU and China have had the same attitude toward Hanoi-led insurgency in South Vietnam? "Give them enough support to keep them fighting, keeping the US occupied; but not enough to win"? That is especially plausible for 1972.)

The paragraph citing this in US News is headed: "CIA cynicism." It starts: "A CIA memo...revealed both the cynical US position on the Kurdish question..." (The word "cynical" is used curiously, in terms of its dictionary definition; the memo would seem to be a cynical interpretation of "US" motives: i.e., realistically seeing them as totally self-serving and otherwise unprincipled, uncaring for the Kurds, and publically deceptive.)

Meanwhile, the Administration seems cynical about the US public's concerns. "White House officials are confident that the American public feels it has won the war and now wants to get out as quickly as possible--and that the best way for the White House to counter any lingering moral qualms is to say as little as

possible. 'It sounds harsh, but I don't think one American family wants to see their son or daughter endangered by a civil war in Iraq,' says a senior Bush adviser. [That was true before the bombing started, and before the ground war started, too: but Bush ignored that majority sentiment then. "A Washington Post-ABC poll found that 45% of those surveyed want to see America help the rebels. The poll takers said the public does not so much sympathize with the Kurds as resent that Hussein is still in power and able to act with apparent impunity."]

"Bush and his advisers believe they can keep the war an 'uplifting' experience. Bush himself appeared on the 'Salute to Our Troops' to declare that 'while we freed a tiny nation, we also regained confidence in America's special decency, courage, compassion and devotion to principle.'" [US News, April 15, p. 28. All italics in these notes added.]

--On Saddam Hussein as "our" Hitler up until August 2, see Noam Chomsky in In These Times, Feb. 20-26, 1991, p. 16. The "paradox" of our present policy (in which Bush still supports the Baath dictatorship: preferably under a Saddam clone other than Saddam, but under Saddam if the Party won't oblige by killing him) is no aberration, no anomaly. It is symptomatic and representative of our entire policy with respect to Third World regimes, in direct opposition to our declaratory policy favoring democracy and self-determination.

As for my thesis on Faits Malaccomplis: Chomsky points out that Bush personally (and before him, the Reagan, and to be fair, the Carter Administrations) had invested personal political capital in cultivating a close relationship with Saddam: just as with Noriega. Even to the point of ignoring the Iraqi attack on the Stark! (Would not the latter incident itself suggest strongly to Saddam that he would get away with going beyond the level of initiative that Glaspie had indicated was acceptable?) (Thus, as NC says, revealing "a degree of independence that the US will never tolerate.")

(A question I raise by the reference to Faits Malaccomplis could be put: What political consequences did George Bush have to fear--given his prior "trust" in Saddam--if he had done nothing in the face of Saddam's challenge? How might the Democrats have used that, given their pressure for sanctions earlier in 1990, in the upcoming elections and later? The corresponding question for JFK in 1962 is easily answered. This one has hardly been raised.)

--Note my puzzlement about the logic of "supporting" the troops by supporting the President who had put them at risk, and policies endangering them which a majority of the public had earlier opposed. Andrew Kopkind, Nation, April 8, 1991: "Peace protesters never got their point across that the best way to protect our troops was to bring them home, for the goal was not

protection but glorification." p. 447. [Aha! "Glorify" was the meaning of "support." "Love" them as soldiers, military personnel, not as family members, people, citizens. Give them not love and protection but admiration, fame, adulation as warriors, and hope for their victory (or brave death) in battle.]

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Scratchpad (let's see if I can really accept the discipline of making telegraphic, scratchpad type notes on a computer)

The Nonviolent Activist (WRL) March 1991

WRL statement on War in the Middle East: "Our hearts are with all those facing combat, including American service men and women, the Iraqi armed forces who are conscripts

[what of Iraqi volunteers? How are they different from American volunteers? (US volunteer army, as Molnar's critics kept pointing out! "Aren't they human, too? Do their lives have no value?") The Iraqi volunteers didn't sign up to commit aggression, any more than their draftees, or our volunteers in Vietnam.

But to see the 200,000 Iraqi military as victims: doesn't that come close to the sentiments revealed today in Reagan's letters regarding Bitburg? Reagan claimed that some of the SS buried there "had been executed for trying to shield inmates from torture and the ovens." This is extremely improbable--Reagan claims he was told it, without evidence, from German officials having to do with his visit--and Hilberg says there was no proof (was there even a prior rumor?) that any SS man had been executed for such a reason. But in 1985 Reagan said "There are 2,000 graves there, and most of those, the average age is about 18...I think there is nothing wrong with visiting that cemetery where these young men are victims of Nazism also, even though they were fighting in German uniform...They were victims, just as surely as the victims of concentration camps." (SF Chronicle, April 20, 1991).

Of course, their essentially coerced or manipulated status does not (fully) excuse any crimes in which they might have participated; but their status as war casualties does allow them to be described as victims of Nazism. Are not the Iraqi military dead and wounded--all of them--victims of Saddam Hussein, and of the US?

We need to rethink the whole issue of the ethics of warfare, in an era where one-sided air war can so exterminate "defenseless" ground troops, as well as civilians. (Why did this not happen on this scale in Korea, once the lines were stabilized? Or in Iran-Iraq--or did it?) See Lifton's description of a "project of annihilation" (ITT) and Thompson on "exterminism."

Anyway, an interesting distinction, or slip, for WRL to make!

--see WRL comments on machismo, and gender gap.

--"We do not believe in any war, but of all the wars the US

might have chosen to fight, this one makes the least sense."

WRL totally ignores--neglects to mention--the factor of aggression, or the occupation/annexation of Kuwait; or the control of oil as an issue that might concern others than America. Given the factor of oil, does this intervention really make less sense than Korea? However, the arguments against this are also arguments against Korea; and in retrospect, that strengthens, rather than weakens, the argument against this intervention. (The effects to be expected from a war,...). However, WRL ignores the factors that led to UN, and then to Congressional, support for the war, support which was absent in all previous cases.

As for "war will solve no problems," the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait should not be ignored as a problem (just as World War II solves some problems). As did Vietnam, for the Vietnamese. Though...

WRL is right, clearly: "Our society, and Arab society, will bear the wounds of the folly of Bush's action for decades to come."

--Judis, in ITT, raises question of what it means to be a leftist today. (As in, "Am I, John Judis, a leftist in any currently meaningful sense? Perhaps it is in answer to this question that he is led to emphasize "support for democracy," which leads to the paradoxical speculation that Henry Hyde (opposing speech bans on campuses) and conservative supporters of Yeltsin, etc. may be the leftists of the future: i.e., along with Judis?!

But note: The "left" in the Sixties sense and even before, never did put high priority on democracy in the Third World--any more than the USG did! Advocates (some in the CIA!) of "Third Force" figures and groups, some representing liberal democracy, were dismissed by both Left and Right as naive, unrealistic. The Left supported, or at the least tolerated, revolutionary movements and then regimes which were undemocratic in spirit and practice, as a vehicle of "progress," development, "socialism," and independence from imperial powers. Liberals in the Third World were seen by the Left--in the West and in their own countries--as either "merely reformist" (by committed socialists, revolutionaries) or as too open to corruption and cooption, unrealistic about the forces arrayed against them and the tasks required, or likely to be displaced (killed, tortured, imprisoned or exiled) by generals or dictators backed by the US, or beaten electorally by those more subservient to the West.

Meanwhile, the USG saw such liberal nationalists as either too open to and likely to be displaced by "communists" or "extremists," or as too little subservient themselves to US perceptions of US and global interests.